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A Note on the Prairie Falcon

BY LOUIS AGASSIZ FUERTES

WITH A DRAWING BY THE AUTHOR

AFTER a month or more in the field in California, Dr. C. Hart Merriam, Frank M. Chapman, W. W. Price and myself reached Pyramid Lake, Nevada, on the desert side of the Sierras, about July 8, 1903, whither we went to make a study of the great white pelican rookery. But whether pelicans, Pahiutes, or prairie falcons interested us most it would be hard to tell—and certainly the splendid Pyramid Lake trout was not least among the attractions of the region.

The central part of the island adopted by the pelicans for their colony rises some four hundred feet, in the form of a great concretion, sloping steeply on the north, and precipitous and cliffy on the south. The lower "bench," by far the greater part of the island's area, was occupied by the pelicans, but the castellated dome in the center was usurped and tenaciously held by a pair of prairie falcons and their three grown young, and the bird from which this study was made was killed (almost in self-defence) well toward the crest on the cliff-like southern acclivity. All about this point, which I took to be near the eyry, were strewn the feathers of quails and jays, which must have been carried from the mainland, nowhere less than a mile and a half distant.

As I looked down from my position at a height on the wall-like face of the cliff, the yellow rock merged into the chalky levels below, where the huddling herds of young pelicans crowded together; then came the white alkali beach, which lost itself in the wonderful blue of Pyramid Lake—the most glorious color water ever had. And against this marvellous color, the blistering sun gleaming on their broad snowy backs and wings, the old pelicans soared magnificently below me, while the falcons screamed in the clear air around my head. I think this was one of the most striking experiences I ever had, and I stood a long time imbibing the varied new sensations of sound and color before I at last turned my steps downward to join the 'census bureau' on the lower levels, where Dr. Mer-



THE PRAIRIE FALCON

Falco mexicanus

Drawn by Louis Agassiz Fuertes

riam and Mr. Chapman were diligently counting the young pelicans in the rookeries. And when, finally, the work was done, and we went back to the boats and our Indians rowed us away from the curious bird cities on the island, it was nearly night, and long before we had crossed the seven miles of water that lay before us the wonderful evening fell, the almost peacock blue of the water faded and became purple, violet, and at last, as the full moon rose over the jagged horizon all settled into the cool gray night of the desert.

Ithaca, N. Y.

Do Birds Migrate along their Ancient Immigration Routes?

BY LEONHARD STEJNEGER

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IN THE last number of THE CONDOR Prof. W. W. Cooke has an article entitled "An Untenable Theory of Bird Migration" intended as a refutation of Palmén's theory, which in a paper not specially devoted to bird migration I had briefly stated in its generality as follows: "The annual migration route of a species indicates the way by which it originally immigrated into its present breeding home." His laudable aim is to stop this "error" before it makes further headway "in this country."

And wherein consists this *refutation* of this *untenable theory* and *error*? The negative example of *Protonotaria citrea* which, it is claimed, cannot have immigrated into its present breeding home by a *portion* of its migration route, viz., that part which lies between southern Mexico and the mouth of the Mississippi River! He gives an explanation of how it may have happened that the prothonotary warbler now apparently makes a direct flight across the Gulf of Mexico, and if examined closely it will be found that this explanation, so far from being a *refutation* is merely a slight modification of the theory.

But even if Prof. Cooke's example were shown to be diametrically opposite to Palmén's theory, the latter was never meant or never said to include all and every kind of migration route kept by the thousands of species. No doubt many routes have been deeply modified by comparatively recent topographical and hydrographical changes. In others the modifications have been less marked, in few perhaps there have been no modifications in details. But that does not affect the truth of Palmén's generalization in its wider applicability, nor make it an "untenable" theory, much less an "error." To "refute" this hypothesis which has stood the test of nearly forty years, it is not enough to prove that there are some birds which go to their breeding grounds by other routes, but it must be shown that the vast majority do not go by the original immigration route. Even were it demonstrated that the theory holds only for a limited number of species it could not be dismissed as untenable and erroneous.

I may also call attention to the fact that when I referred to Palmén's theory